

The question of temperance

David H. Fahey, *The Politics of Drink in England, from Gladstone to Lloyd George* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022)

Review by Iain Sharpe

It can be tempting to see the two decades before the First World War as marking the emergence of something like the version of party politics that dominated the twentieth century, in which class consciousness and a drive for social reform through the welfare state were dominant factors. So it can be disconcerting to be reminded that for much of this period the most important social issue in British politics, one that could have a significant and even decisive effect on election results, was the state regulation of alcohol sales – the so-called temperance question.

While issues concerning excessive drinking, licensing laws and the health impacts of alcohol consumption have occasionally hit the headlines in the past century, for example with fears in the 'noughties' about so-called 'alcopops' or twenty-four-hour drinking, they have been peripheral to political debate. Yet, in the late nineteenth century, problems of public drunkenness, alcohol consumption as a cause of poverty, and the supposedly malign role of the drink trade in providing occasion for temptation, meant that temperance reform was seen as one of the most pressing social questions, possibly even the most important one. Probably because it faded as a political issue, temperance reform has received less attention

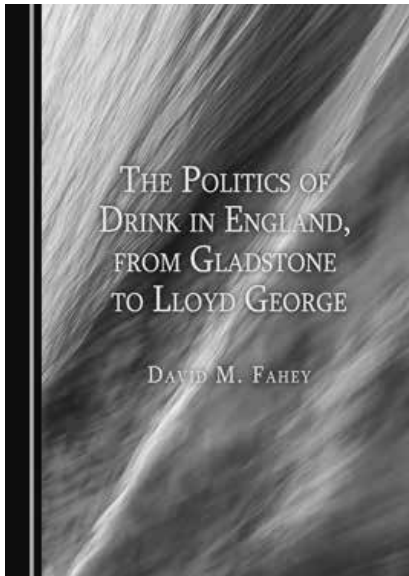
from historians than the growth of the welfare state, trade unions and the development of class politics. There have been histories of pressure groups fighting for temperance legislation or longer surveys of the politics of drink and indeed studies of the social role of beer and pubs. But Professor Fahey's book is the first to look in detail at drink as a political issue during these decades when it was most prominent as a controversial public question.

The book is the culmination of more than half a century's work on the temperance question by the author, whose numerous journal articles on drink as a political question have been essential reading for those studying late Victorian and Edwardian politics. Now well into his ninth decade, Fahey has written this volume in the face of serious ill-health and simultaneous failure of hard disk and backup, leading to an enforced redrafting. If the book's subject is temperance, its publication is more a tribute to the author's perseverance.

While concern about the dangers of drunkenness had a long history, in mid-nineteenth century Britain this gained increased prominence as a social and political question that needed to be addressed. Such anxiety was widely shared across the political spectrum and among

all classes. There was less agreement about what should be done. Solutions ranged from promoting the voluntary renunciation of alcohol ('signing the pledge'), to prohibition, to so-called 'free licensing' – the idea that ending monopolies would lead to improved products and the sale of weaker beverages in preference to stronger spirits. The latter theory was a motivation behind the Licensing Act of 1830 that allowed anyone to sell beer on payment of two guineas a year. This led to an explosion in the number of pubs, which reached an all-time high by the time this system was abolished in 1869.

The burgeoning temperance movement sought to reduce through legislation the number of licensed premises in a bid to end the social evils supposedly caused by the demon drink. In this, it has to be said, they were strikingly unsuccessful. Divisions within the temperance movement, insistence on letting the perfect drive out the good, and the extreme hostility of the licensed trade to any attempts at reform, often sabotaged practical temperance measures. The moderate reforms introduced by Gladstone's first administration via the Licensing Act of 1872, itself a climbdown from previous, more comprehensive proposals, produced a backlash from the trade,



leading Gladstone to attribute the Liberals' subsequent defeat to being 'borne down on a torrent of gin and beer'. While this was an exaggeration, the whole experience led to an ongoing nervousness among politicians on all sides about tackling the drink question.

While the temperance cause continued to have advocates across the political spectrum, it became increasingly associated with the Liberal Party, as the Conservatives became, in the language of the period, defenders of the right of the working man's right to enjoy his pint of beer. At the same time, the country's leading temperance organisation, the United Kingdom Alliance, became increasingly intransigent in pursuing its chief demand of 'local veto', a form of prohibition based on local referendums which might lead to a reduction in the number of pubs in a given area, and potentially the closure of them all. This could be presented as a democratic measure, giving popular control over the vested interests of the drink trade. Yet it usually contained an element

of snobbery – hotels, which the middle classes frequented, would be exempt.

From 1864 onwards, the Liberal MP and leading temperance campaigner Sir Wilfrid Lawson introduced an annual local veto resolution in the House of Commons which passed for the first time in 1880 and in 1883 received the support of Gladstone himself. Yet when the proposal was taken up in earnest by the Liberal government of 1892–95, its local veto bills were cited by the party's candidates as a major reason for its landslide defeat at the subsequent general election. As one candidate commented, it 'alienated a number of Liberal voters, and every public-house was a Tory committee room'. Sir William Harcourt, the Liberal leader in the House of Commons and the minister most prominently associated with the temperance cause, was among the party's many electoral casualties.

In the wake of the 1895 general election catastrophe, more moderate Liberals attempted to push the party down a more moderate, practical path. Among these was Herbert Gladstone, son of William, who as chief whip in 1899 seized the opportunity presented by the reporting of a royal commission on licensing laws (appointed by the Unionist government in 1896 to appease temperance sentiment in its own ranks) to abandon the local veto. The impact of the commission was to move the debate on to schemes to reduce the number of pubs, together with levels of

compensation to be paid to owners of premises that were closed down, and time limits for paying it. The commissioners could not agree on a single plan but divided between a more ambitious (from a temperance point of view) minority report signed by the chairman, Lord Peel, and a more cautious minority report. So, rather than providing a consensus, it ended up creating new dividing lines.

Ironically the most significant piece of temperance legislation enacted during this period that was designed to reduce significantly the number of pubs, the Unionist government's Licensing Act of 1904, was approved in the face of near unanimous opposition from the temperance lobby but with the support of the licensed trade. In the light of increasing concern about the proliferation of pubs (even as numbers were actually reducing anyway) magistrates had begun to refuse licence renewal on their own initiative without compensation. As a result, under pressure from the trade, the Unionist government enacted proposals that encouraged a reduction in the number of pubs but enshrined in law the owners' right to compensation. While the Liberal Party joined in the widespread opposition to the measure, its own Licensing Bill of 1908, which sought to redress the balance, became one of a number of proposals that fell foul of the Unionist majority in the House of Lords.

Possibly the greatest driver of temperance reform was the outbreak of the First World War. Amid concern

about drunkenness among munitions workers, Lloyd George notoriously commented: 'We are fighting Germany, Austria and drink, and as far as I can see, the greatest of these three deadly foes is drink.' He persuaded King George V to pledge abstinence for the duration of the war, although he did not necessarily follow suit. But many of the measures that became a feature of how public houses operated for much of the rest of the twentieth century were introduced during this time. This included reduced licensing hours, reduced strength of beer and increased taxes. One experiment that was not so widely adopted was the experiment in Carlisle of

nationalising the production and sale of alcohol, a scheme that surprisingly lasted until 1973.

Dr Fahey, who is Professor Emeritus at Miami University, Ohio, is a reliable and informative guide to the different elements of the drink and temperance debate during this period of its greatest prominence as a political question. He brings to life the often-eccentric characters who drove forward the temperance movement, explains the nuances of their different approaches and of the frequent divisions within the trade, as well as clarifying some of the often-arcanic terminology associated with

the debate, whether 'disinterested management' or 'monopoly value'. It is a shame, albeit sadly not a surprise, that the cost of the book means that its circulation will be largely confined to academic libraries, as it could have been enjoyed by those with a more general interest in the political and social history of the period. But it is still a valuable and important contribution to the literature on this subject.

Dr Iain Sharpe studied history at Leicester and London universities, completing a doctoral thesis on the Liberal Party in the Edwardian era in 2011. He was a Liberal Democrat councillor in Watford from 1991 to 2021.

Law and politics

Neil Hickman, *An Analytical Study of Lord Hewart: Despotism Renewed, Hewart Unburied* (Kindle Direct Publishing, 2024)

Review by David Dutton

Usually, this book begins with a gentle rebuke for the Liberal Democrat History Group, or at least for the failure of the group's website to make any mention in its 'People' section of Gordon Hewart, Viscount Hewart (1870–1943). Granted that Hewart, Liberal MP for Leicester and subsequently Leicester East (1913–22), having declined appointment as Lloyd George's home secretary, served in that prime minister's coalition government as both solicitor general (December 1916–January 1919) and attorney general (January 1919–March 1922), the point is

well-taken. In mitigation, however, the group could reasonably point out that Hewart's fame derives less from his political activity and more from his occupancy over nearly two decades of the (nominally at least) non-political office of lord chief justice (1922–40).

A serviceable biography of Hewart, written by Robert Jackson, was in fact published as long ago as 1959. Those who produce biographical revisions of the existing literature on significant figures generally rely on the availability of new sources – perhaps the private

papers of the individual under scrutiny – denied to earlier writers. Any such study of Hewart would, however, face a very different situation. Hewart's private papers, available to Jackson, have subsequently disappeared. The subject's widow revealed that the deed box storing this archive was taken by burglars in the mistaken belief that it might contain valuable jewellery. But Neil Hickman, a retired district judge, does not seek to write a new biography. His book begins with a brief narrative of Hewart's career, but this is only an introduction to more substantial chapters. Indeed,